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ABSTRACT

The popular "Chicken Soup for the Soul" series of books demonstrates the tremendous desire of people in all walks of life to tell their stories. A professor of reading/language arts methods for students in a program leading to teacher certification reads to his classes every day from a wide variety of materials, including stories from the "Chicken Soup for the Soul" series. His students at both graduate and undergraduate levels prepare a comprehensive portfolio containing original works ranging from an autobiography to lesson plans on teaching phonics. Two semesters ago, the professor decided to include a Chicken-Soup-style story as part of the portfolio, and the response to this assignment has been very positive. The stories are often school related, and writing this type of story would probably be well received by high school and middle school students. "Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul" has been a tremendous best seller. Classes might enjoy creating their own book of stories to share with each other and even to include in the school and/or town library. The assignment and a sample story illustrate how it can be done. (NKA)

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Chicken Soup for the Portfolio

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Chicken Soup for the Portfolio

The enormously popular Chicken Soup series of books, produced by Chicken Soup for the Soul Enterprises, demonstrates the tremendous desire people in all walks of life to tell their stories. According to Nancy Audio, a member of the staff, they receive an average of 100 stories each day from would-be Chicken Soup authors.

As a reading/language arts methods instructor for students in a program leading to teacher certification, I read to my classes every day from a wide variety of materials. I occasionally read a Chicken Soup story and, also, noticed how popular these books are with the students. It seems that just about every college student has read several stories from the Chicken Soup books and some own several books in the series.

The students at both graduate and undergraduate levels prepare a comprehensive portfolio containing a lot of original works ranging from a cloth-bound autobiography to lesson plans on teaching phonics. I decided to include a Chicken Soup style story as part of the portfolio two semesters ago. The response to this assignment has been tremendously positive. The stories have been beautifully written accounts of a wide variety of events and experiences.

Many of the graduate students are teachers and, not surprisingly, the stories are often school related. In one class of 12 graduate students, I asked if anyone wanted to read their Chicken Soup story. Everybody

wanted to read their story. There was passion and great drama in the readings and close attention paid by the audience. The stories were gracefully composed with much attention paid to craftsmanship. I did not ask the undergraduate students if they wanted to read their stories because there were 30 students and that would have taken too much time.

I encouraged but, of course, did not require, the students to send their stories to Chicken Soup Enterprises. When proposing a story for publication, the writer must designate for which *Soul* category the story is intended: i.e. teacher's, pet lover's .... The address is: Chicken Soup for the Soul Enterprises, P.O. Box 30880, Santa Barbara, CA 93130.

I plan to include the Chicken Soup assignment as part of the portfolio in the future. I believe writing Chicken Soup style stories would also be well received by high school and quite possibly middle school students, as well. *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul* (Canfield, Hanson, & Kirberger, 1997) has been a tremendous best seller. It seems natural that teenagers would enthusiastically write their own stories. Classes might enjoy creating their own book of stories to share with each other and even to include in the town and/or school library.

A description of the assignment is presented below followed by a model Chicken Soup style narrative title Timmy that I wrote to demonstrate format for the portfolio:

Chicken Soup Assignment

"*The Chicken Soup for the Soul* series of books are very popular. One of our assignments is to compose an original Chicken Soup style narration. This activity involves writing a story about an inspiring life experience.

You might have been the key person in the event, played a part in it, or been a witness. Further, through writing this story you are demonstrating your desire to share this story.

As in the manner of most of the Chicken Soup published stories, provide a short message at the outset of the narration. This can be a statement that demonstrates the universal theme or is just a fitting introduction to the story. You are invited to make up your own message or quote someone else. If you quote someone else, be sure to keep a record of where you obtained the quote.

The maximum length is 1200 words. This would be about five type written double-spaced pages. The minimum length is 400 words which is about two double-spaced pages. The Chicken Soup style narrative is part of your portfolio for this class.

Please do you work on a word processor and be sure to save your story. Edit your story carefully and be confident that there are no grammatical or spelling errors. During writers' workshop times in class we can share drafts of the narrations. Another valuable resource for checking your written work is the Writing Center located in Room 409. The capable and friendly staff are always willing to provide support for you as you continue to write.

The Chicken Soup article is due on 16 February 2000.

Chicken Soup Assignment

Timmy

We settled in on the third floor of the old high school, which was now what they called the intermediate school. This was home for me, a first year teacher, and my 24 sixth graders. The class had its usual variety of students, some big and awkward, some undersized and impatiently waiting for the anticipated adolescent growth spurt.

Timmy was by far the largest student in the class. He stood about 5 feet 10 inches tall and weighed over 200 pounds. To complicate matters, he was 14 years old but read with the ability typical of that of a second grader.

I didn't notice much about Timmy during the first week of school. It was a busy time with all the organizational requirements. Timmy was quiet, respectful, and polite both to me and to his classmates.

Our first rather short field trip occurred during the second week of school. I told the class about our trip to the town library which was about three blocks away. The school had no library. The trip was not unusual for the students because most of them had been in the school since fourth grade. However, what was new to some of them was my description of an activity called sustained silent reading.

Each student could check out up to three books. However, one of the books was for our in-class sustained silent reading. We would read every day for 15 minutes without any interruptions. I explained how this was their time to read any book they wanted provided it was a novel, biography, or story about an event such as the Civil War. I encouraged them to get a book that was not too easy or too hard but one they would enjoy. The students responded very positively.

We went to the town library the next morning. The students eagerly perused the book shelves sampling and eventually selecting books. I picked two books myself and walked around chatting with students. After about 15 minutes, I announced that it was time to make final selections and go to the check out counter. It was then that I noticed Timmy. He had one book. It was *Exodus* by Leon Uris. I quietly asked Timmy if this was the book he really liked best and he assured me that it was. Timmy joined the other students in the line and checked out *Exodus* .

We returned to our classroom and, as promised, we had our uninterrupted sustained silent reading time for 15 minutes. The room was very quiet except for the occasional sound of turning pages. I read silently along with the students, occasionally lifting my eyes to look at the children. Admittedly, I was very interested in Timmy's response to *Exodus*. He looked quite serious and occasionally turned a page. In my now troubled heart, I knew this book was so far above his capability level that it must be very frustrating for him to try to read it. But, after all, I had asked the students to pick a book they wanted to read and that was what Timmy did.

Later in the morning, I asked Timmy in a casual way how he liked the book he was reading for sustained silent reading. He replied that is was really good. Our morning rolled along, into and beyond lunch time, and into the early afternoon when it was time for "the gym teacher". The students changed clothes and we went down the three flights of stairs to the gym. There were long benches in the gym and the students were instructed to sit on the benches to await further directions from the gym teacher.

I casually watched the children sitting on the benches when I noticed that beside Timmy, with the spine clearly visible, was *Exodus*. The physical education class progressed and when it was over the children climbed the stairs, including Timmy and *Exodus*. I said nothing but noted to myself how unusual it was for a child to take a book along to gym class.

The school day wound down at 2:45 and we hurriedly prepared for the trip home. The "walkers", those who did not take the bus, left at 2:50. The rest of us followed immediately because I had bus duty and my students got to go to the buses and load up first. Timmy always liked to sit right behind the driver. And there he was with his three ring binder and *Exodus* on his knees facing the front door. Every child who got on the bus practically came face to face with Timmy.

Bus duty was uneventful as usual but busy. There were a few forgotten lunch boxes and a frantic, "I need to get my binder".

I returned to my now quiet classroom and looked at the plans for the next day. Sustained silent reading from 8:35 until 8:55. This was longer than the 15 minutes originally planned but it was a good strategy because the buses didn't all arrive at the same time. And I thought about Timmy and the rather unusual behavior with his book, *Exodus*.

The next morning, Timmy brought *Exodus* back and sat during sustained silent reading time looking like an enthralled reader. This continued for a few more days.

It finally dawned on me what Timmy was doing. He knew full well he could not read the book but it was very important to him that others thought he was a reader: the reader of a "grown-up" book. How my heart ached, both for him and for me.

What pain Timmy must have endured as he struggled to pick out a few words from that overpowering text. I wished with all my heart that I could somehow make him become a reader but I couldn't. I didn't know what to do. The school records bore all the sad details of Timmy's lack of progress in learning just about anything in school.

The next week came around and we went back to the library. I had gone to the library the evening before and discussed the situation with the librarian. She said the problem was, sadly, quite common. She said she would pick out some books that had a mature format but were written with very easy words. She knew just where to find the "high-interest, low-vocabulary" books. She found two on auto racing and two mysteries. The next morning after, to my relief, Timmy dropped *Exodus* into the return slot, I quietly guided Timmy to a table that, to our surprise, had four books on it. I asked Timmy, with considerable trepidation, if he thought he would like any of the books on the table. He eyed me curiously and then began to look over the books. I wandered away but later saw Timmy with all four books in the check out line. "Three's the limit" flashed through my mind, but not for long.

I learned two valuable lessons. The first, older children who cannot read suffer great humiliation and emotional pain. The second, I must be prepared to guide those children toward materials with which they can meet some measure of success. Most important to me, however, was the beginning of a great desire to strive with all my might to become the best teacher I could be, especially one who could bring the gift of reading to my students.

Reference

Canfield, J.. Hansen, M.V., & Kirberger, K. (1997) *Chicken Soup for the Teenage Soul.* Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communication.

Chicken soup article